

# Scanning the Landscape of High School Alternatives

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# About Education Northwest

Founded as a nonprofit corporation in 1966, Education Northwest builds capacity in schools, families, and communities through applied research and development.

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# Introduction

Interest in high school alternatives has grown extensively over the last few decades as communities, school districts, states, and public agencies have sought effective strategies to improve the educational and employment outcomes of young people and better serve students whose needs are not met through the traditional school system. As the high school alternative space has grown, so has its complexity and diversity in terms of students served; mission, goals, and educational approaches as well as the funding sources and accountability strategies deployed by sponsors and regulating agencies (Deeds & DiPaoli, 2018; Jiménez et al., 2018). This proliferation of approaches and models has led to confusion among practitioners, policymakers, and funders about what defines an alternative high school; which practices and models work well and for whom; and what policies and funding strategies are needed to serve students effectively and meet the growing demand for high-quality pathways through and beyond high school.

To help clarify some of these issues, the Annie E. Casey Foundation asked Education Northwest to conduct a systematic scan of high school alternative models and approaches across the United States. The findings from our review of the field appear in this report, which is organized around three key themes:



**Narratives and mindsets.** The ways in which *people speak and think* about students' diverse interests, experiences, perspectives, learning needs, and assets directly influences student success and shapes the practice and policy environment high school alternatives are situated within. In this section of the report, we highlight the importance of asset-based narratives about alternative high school pathways and offer suggestions for how to shape these narratives to better support students served by these programs.



**Policies and budgets.** High school alternatives sit within a complex *policy and budget environment* of district, state, and federal accountability rules and funding systems that shape the work of alternative schools and perceptions about their effectiveness. In this section of the report, we consider needs and recommend strategies for how systems can shift policies and allocate resources to promote authentic accountability that supports program improvement and effectiveness.



**Practice improvement.** High school alternatives typically embed certain evidence-based *effective practices* related to student agency and interest, adult-student relationships, and educator supports in their instructional and support model. In this section of the report, we consider practice improvement needs identified by the field and suggest strategies for improving practice at scale and helping programs to more effectively and responsively help all students reach their goals, including college and career readiness.

## Methods

There is a robust literature of recent environmental scans that use varied approaches (Bridgespan Group, n.d.; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017; Denton & Gandhi, 2020; Education First, 2017; Harder+Company Community Research & Edge Research, 2017; Petrokubi et al., 2019). Drawing on this work, we used the following approach to carry out this scan of high school alternatives:

- Developed a set of criteria for programs to include in the scan based on the population and program interests of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. These criteria are described in appendix B of this report.
- Conducted a website and document review of programs that met our inclusion criteria that generated 18 programs of interest. Appendix B provides a list of the programs identified through our web scan.
- Interviewed 19 key informants—researchers, funders, and other experts working in this space—as well as six of our advisory group members. We discussed effective practices of high school alternatives, conditions that foster success, and the funding and policy facilitators and barriers for these programs. Key informants were identified through our web scan and in conversation with our advisory group. A list of key informant interviewees is provided in appendix A.
- Administered a survey to program leaders and operators to gather information on their structure, effective practices, and focus student population. We also asked program leaders about their program outcomes, process for continuous program improvement, and policy supports and challenges. Eleven of 18 program leaders responded to the survey for a 61 percent response rate. Specific findings from this survey are provided in appendix C.
- Conducted additional follow-up interviews with a random selection of 6 program leaders to describe survey findings in more detail. A list of program leader interviewees is provided in appendix A.
- Summarized the existing research on alternative high schools and categorized using the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) evidence tiers. Appendix B provides evidence of effectiveness for the 18 identified programs. General evidence of effectiveness regarding practices is provided in that section.

## Advisory group

The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Education Northwest identified and convened a set of experts in the field of high school alternatives to support the formation and direction of the scan. This advisory group, comprised of program alumni, researchers, program leaders, and policymakers, provided feedback throughout the project. The advisory group reviewed the scan findings at multiple key stages and engaged in a facilitated discussion about goals and challenges faced by alternative high schools.

## Defining high school alternatives

There is considerable variation in how high school alternatives are defined. We recognize that the word “alternative” may have negative associations for some people, evoking an era in which underserved students were pushed out of existing schools and systems (see Vogell, 2017). We also recognize that it can have connotations of otherness. There are still several high school alternatives in which students are “warehoused” in classrooms or programs and little real learning takes place. These programs are often viewed as a last resort for students who have “failed” in traditional school settings. More recently, many in the field have sought to reclaim the term “alternative” as important spaces of possibility. This approach acknowledges that traditional school systems often fail to fit the needs of many students and that different structures and supports are necessary to help these students succeed (Fort Worth Independent School District, 2021).

**In reality, most high school alternatives often sit somewhere between these two types. While acknowledging the broad diversity of program goals, structures, and outcomes, throughout this report, we use the term “high school alternatives,” defined below.**

### **At their best, high school alternatives:**

- Are necessary because traditional systems—including schools, workforce, postsecondary, criminal justice, and others—*do not serve all students well or equitably*.
- Provide *high-quality educational and career opportunities* to empower students to overcome the systemic barriers they faced in traditional secondary schools.
- Support *flexible and asset-based learning opportunities* that students find meaningful.

### **All schools—alternative and traditional, alike—should strive to:**

- Be a place of *momentum building*. Schools should have a future orientation, providing not only a diploma but also skills, connections to people and resources, certifications, and workforce preparation that provide future education and economic opportunity for all students.
- Nurture *healthy relationships* with caring adults who affirm students’ cultures, identities, backgrounds, and experiences and foster a sense of belonging.
- Empower *high-quality, well-supported educators* and practitioners to provide instructional and comprehensive supports that, in turn, empower young people to transform their lives.

# Key Considerations for Narratives and Mindsets



Key informants, program leaders, and advisory group members identified narratives and mindsets that are the most supportive of student success in high school alternatives.

## High expectations for all students

Interviewees described the need for educators, policymakers, and the public to maintain high expectations for all students that anticipate their ability to meet the demand of rich and appropriate academic opportunities. Interviewees said some people have historically viewed high school alternatives as pushing students through the educational pipeline to a menial job. With a mindset shift toward high expectations for all students, educators can view their role as providing each student with learning and supports that meet their needs and prepare them for college and career. This type of teaching creates individualized pathways that meet students where they are, provide differentiated supports, and set students up for success.

Program leaders discussed how necessary it is to create a supportive environment centered on student strengths. They said some students come to high school alternatives with lower confidence in their academic ability. These students need support to transform those perceptions and instill asset-based ideas of success.

## Full system transformation

Key informants stated there is much that traditional schools can learn from the innovative practices implemented in some alternative settings. For example, high-quality high school alternatives that use effective practices, like strong adult-student relationships, to positively impact students can serve as a learning incubator to share out with

***“When students come in, oftentimes, they come in with these beliefs that they can’t achieve or they’re not going to be able to do it. And when they start to see that success, it really snowballs and then they’re able to complete [their program].”***  
– Program leader

***“It really goes back to looking at our traditional school systems and turning them into alternative school systems. Having them do all the things that [alternative schools are] doing before the students drop out and making them feel connected to their school and their community.”***  
– Program leader



traditional schools. Additionally, alternatives can be adaptive and address disruption. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that many students—including those in traditional schools—need flexible educational opportunities for any number of reasons. Alternative settings can share learnings from their own flexible practices to help traditional systems better adapt to serve students with varied needs.

## Student advocacy

While interviewees described programs that were deeply invested in supporting student success, they also noted the many high school alternatives that fail to serve the interest of students, and even cause active harm. They discussed the challenges that students face when pushed out of traditional schools, often due to pressures some districts feel with federal and state accountability. Not surprisingly, some alternative settings further deficit narratives and can adultify, over-surveil, and criminalize students instead of educating them effectively (Vogell, 2017).

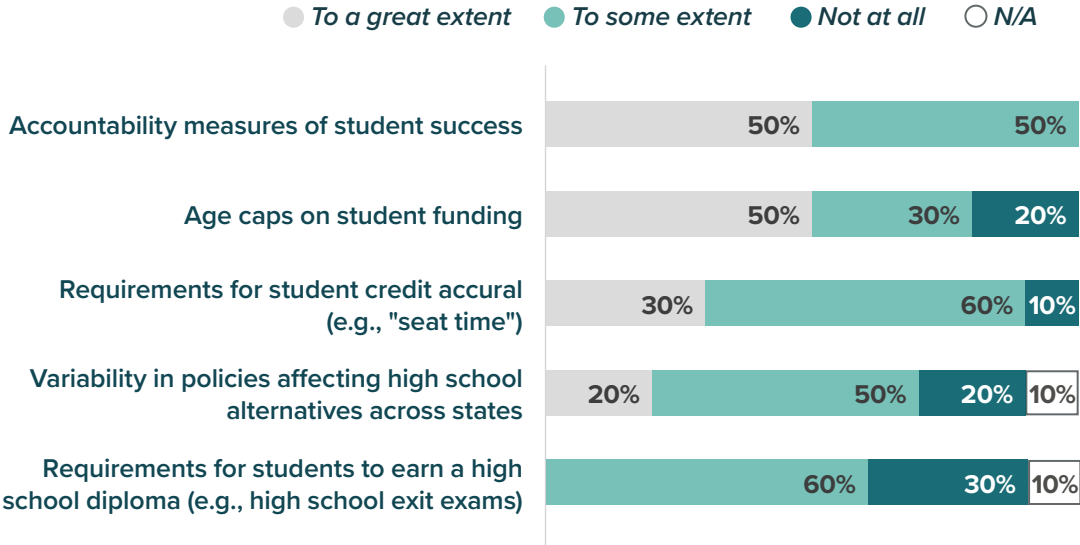
To address this challenge, interviewees stressed the importance of advocacy for the rights of students to access a high-quality education as key to overcoming deficit mindsets and protecting students from low-quality alternatives. These rights are described in the [Student Bill of Rights](#)—written by the National Youth Rights Association to help students address their rights and freedoms which they feel are not being acknowledged by the public educational system.

# Key Considerations for Policies and Budgets



This section describes themes around the policy and fiscal needs that support high school alternative program success. We initially asked key informants and advisory group members to identify policy and budget and fiscal issues that affect the work of high school alternatives, then we asked program leaders to rank the issues which have the greatest influence on their work. For the 10 program leaders who responded to our survey, *accountability measures*, *age caps on student funding*, and *requirements for student credit accrual* were the issues that most impacted their work (figure 1).

**Figure 1. Most program leaders said accountability measures and age caps on student funding impact their work**



Source: Education Northwest analysis of 2022 program leader survey (n = 10).

## Alternative accountability measures

Accountability for high school alternatives continues to receive a lot of attention (Deeds & DiPaoli, 2018; Gardner Center, 2020; Jiménez et al., 2018).<sup>1</sup> While accountability for results is important, most states use the same measures for both traditional and alternative high schools. These measures do not adequately reflect student engagement, academic growth, or preparation for college and careers within alternative high schools (Kannam & Weiss, 2019). In many cases, alternative programs and groups of programs are often left to develop their own internal measures of effectiveness. However, interviewees said public, external accountability measures still greatly shape perceptions of the effectiveness of high school alternatives. For example, some program leaders said reliance on grade-level math and reading standards or four-year graduation rate requirements reflect poorly on the quality of high school alternatives and the students served in these programs.

Program leaders suggest policymakers would be better served using growth-oriented measures of student success and focusing on skills for future preparation (e.g., college and career success and skill development, social and emotional learning). Accountability measures vary nationally, but some states have successfully shifted accountability measures for alternative high schools. For example, [Colorado](#) includes both academic growth and postsecondary and workforce readiness in its high school alternative accountability dashboard, while [California](#) uses a grade 12 graduation rate instead of a cohort-based graduation rate. In a 2019 analysis, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) found 17 states that had modified their accountability system in some way to better address the nuance and complexity of alternative high school pathways (Kannam & Weiss, 2019).

## Age limits on student funding

Interviewees described the importance of increasing age limits tied to funding for diploma-seeking students. State policy dictates the upper age limits for required free education with some exceptions for students qualifying for special education. Most states set this at 20 or 21 years old, though some are lower (e.g., the Alabama age limit is 17). Some states have addressed this issue by adapting policy to extend the age limit (e.g., the Texas age limit is 26), but interviewees suggested that more states should make this

**New York City’s District 79 is home to a complex system of high school alternatives serving disconnected youth, systems-involved students, immigrants, and others. The district built an internal accountability system to analyze and evaluate data in a useful way across multiple schools. The district produces quarterly report cards and sends out dashboards of enrollment and attendance on a weekly basis. They measure success against themselves: What were outcomes on indicators this year versus last year?**

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<sup>1</sup> For example the annual [Reaching At-Promise Students Association](#) Conference always has a strong focus on issues of accountability.

change. Additionally, six of 10 programs that responded to our survey serve students age 24 or older. A few program leaders who responded to the survey said policies or waivers that allow them to serve older students and cover program costs were key to their program's success.

## Requirements for credit accrual and earning a diploma

Interviewees said policy requirements for credit accrual that are based on traditional school settings often limit the ability of programs to implement highly effective practices, like flexible credit accrual, work-based learning, and competency-based credit accrual. A few program leaders also noted policies around seat time limit their program design. Interviewees said that state and district policies should be adjusted to align requirements for credit accrual to best practices in alternative high schools.

Fewer people interviewed cited challenges in the testing requirements for students to earn a high school diploma, though six of 10 program leaders who responded to the survey still said this was a barrier to some extent (see figure 1). Interviewees said high school exit exams (e.g., the New York state Regents exams) can pose a barrier to students who need an alternative route to a diploma and that in many instances these exams should be removed in alignment with best practices for high school alternatives. However, people said it was important that these efforts still result in a state issued high school diploma.

**As a collaboration between Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction - Alternative Education and the Wisconsin Technical College System, the competency-based High School Equivalency Diploma policy provides relevancy and future orientation for students by combining diploma-seeking activities and postsecondary credentialing. Students earn credits toward their diploma while developing career-related skills, such as math needed to be a nurse or writing about activities in their automotive courses.**

## Variability in high school alternative policy across states and levels

Interviewees often discussed the fragmented nature of the policy environment related to high school alternatives. For example, age caps on funding, alternative accountability systems, and competency-based diploma options vary across states. Program leaders said they struggled to scale successful programs across the country due to differences in policies across states and districts. These differences either limited program spread or required significantly more work to overcome these barriers depending on the site. Interviewees said they needed strategies and supports to help them advocate for policy across states that is aligned to best practices.

## Policy considerations for program funding

A few key informants and program leaders identified the following issues and potential promising practices to consider regarding funding for high school alternatives.

### MEANINGFULLY WEIGHTED

Weighted funding is increasingly being used by districts to allocate more dollars to schools that enroll more students who need additional support, such as students from low-income households, English learner students, and students with disabilities—some of the populations most often served by high school alternatives (Roza et al, 2020). Typically, alternative programs will receive the per pupil funding as traditional schools—or less, in contracted arrangements—in spite of students requiring smaller class sizes and more intense services and supports. Ensuring that weighted funding becomes the norm in high school alternatives would ensure educators have the resources they need to support each student’s individual needs.

### COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES

Students in high school alternatives can often thrive when their basic needs, such as food, shelter, child-care, mental health supports, and clean clothes, are attended to. Basic needs funding varies significantly in high school alternative settings, however, based on location, program structure, and population served. For example, states have the option of providing physical and behavioral health care services for any student who is enrolled in Medicaid—and they can get federal Medicaid reimbursement for those services—but not all states have implemented this policy (Mays, 2021). Some programs serving students who are over-aged rely on grants and/or partnerships with community-based organizations to provide comprehensive services. Consistent funding for comprehensive services and case management helps ensure students’ nonacademic needs are met, which in turn allows them to focus on learning.

### WORK-BASED LEARNING SUPPORTS

Funding for work-based learning can provide programs the needed supports to give students hands-on experience in line with best practices. For example, the Workforce Innovations and Opportunities Act (WIOA) provides funding that supports work-based learning. However, program leaders noted that these funds are typically not available to high school alternatives since 75 percent of the funding must be allocated to programs serving out-of-school youth. A few program leaders said that expanding funding opportunities for work-based learning could facilitate this best practice among more programs. This could be done through facilitated partnerships with community youth employment programs and the local Workforce Investment Board (WIB). Dual enrollment/dual credit funding tied to career pathways may offer another model for funding work-based learning for students in alternative high school pathways.

## FUNDING THAT FOLLOWS STUDENTS

Student transfer policies also vary by state and district. One educator described a district where student funding stayed with the school they attended as of October 1, even if the student moved to an alternative school later in the year. For high school alternatives to effectively support students, funding should follow students to whatever school they are attending, as is already done in some districts.

## LONG-TERM PROGRAM FUNDING

Program leaders said funding timelines do not always give them enough time to establish quality practices in their programs. Additionally, program leaders said funding streams often run out after two or three years, leaving programs struggling to find other financial support. Many alternative schools end up augmenting public funding with private sources, sometimes as much as a 50/50 split. Flexible, multi-year funding helps build capacity and sustain effective practices within a program.

## Alternative educator certifications

A few key informants suggested educators could be better supported in their preparation to meet the needs of students in high school alternatives. They suggested adding an alternative educator certification or a set of alternative microcredentials that include the expanded qualifications needed by alternative educators (e.g., trauma-informed/healing-centered practices, positive youth development, effective case management).

***Short-term funding timelines are “... not enough time to move a needle on almost anything in our field, dramatically, to really make change. You can change a school in a couple years, but then two years later, it might fall apart again because you didn't get it deep. I just think, pick one thing and stay with it for a while.”***

**– Program leader**

# Effective Practices in High School Alternatives



We asked key informant and program leader interviewees to describe the effective practices to support student success in high school alternatives. We list the effective practices described by interviewees in three categories: *student agency and interest*, *adult-student relationships*, and *staff supports*. Almost all these practices are recommended as “best practices in the field of education” by the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA, 2014, p. 3). We indicate the practices that align with the NAEA Standards of Quality and Program Evaluation <sup>2</sup> with an asterisk (\*). For adult-student relationships and student agency and interest, we also provide descriptions of effective and ineffective ways of approaching the key practice.

## Student agency and interest

Interviewees emphasized the importance of student agency and interest to the success of students in high school alternatives (table 1). This includes student voice in how programs are designed and implemented. In survey responses, program leaders noted student-focused, relevant, and personalized coursework and coaching, along with flexibility, were among the most helpful aspects of their programs.

**The Excel Center is a free high school for adults that offers opportunities for students to participate in accelerated courses that help them demonstrate competency and earn their diploma at a faster pace than traditional, attendance-based schooling. This allows students to use the extra time to earn free college credit and industry-recognized certifications while earning their diploma. Students are supported in navigating these options by life coaches.**

<sup>2</sup> Find more information about the NAEA Standards of Quality and Program Evaluation at: <https://www.the-naea.org/uploads/1/3/0/2/130215129/naea-exemplary-practices-2.0-updated-2018.pdf>

**Table 1. Effective practices of high school alternatives – conditions for student agency and interest**

<b>Opportunities for student agency and interest</b>	<b>Effective</b>	<b>Ineffective</b>
<b>Environments for learning</b>	Space where students feel safe, welcomed, and valued during their experience (Slaten et al., 2017)*	<i>Whatever is available (e.g., building basement, on-site trailer) without modifications to support student needs and learning</i>
<b>Educational goals</b>	Student-identified goals that grow with student interest and abilities and set students up for secondary and postsecondary success (Phillips, 2013)*	<i>Adult-identified goals that only consider students' current abilities or challenges</i>
<b>Credit accrual</b>	Flexible and accessible credit accrual options that do not have "seat time" requirements but rather allow for competency-based completion (Lincove et al., 2022)	<i>Requirements for attendance and standardized testing, similar to traditional schools</i>
<b>Student supports</b>	Differentiated, context-specific instructional and comprehensive (instructional, physical, emotional) supports for students who come with diverse needs, abilities, talents, and interests; use of community partnerships to assist in providing comprehensive support services (Slaten et al., 2016)*	<i>One-size-fits-all approach to instruction with few if any comprehensive support options</i>
<b>Work-based learning</b>	Relevant, mentor-supported experience connected directly to college and/or career opportunities (Newton et al., 2017; Theodus, 2017)*	<i>Rudimentary training for menial jobs; assumption that students are not college material and rule out postsecondary options</i>
<b>Student opportunities for engagement</b>	Extracurricular and leadership opportunities, like student government; youth partnerships that influence program development; worksite leadership opportunities (Baroutsis et al., 2016)*	<i>Course-completion opportunities only</i>

Source: Education Northwest analysis of relevant literature and key informant and program leader interviews, informed advisory group input.



As part of the surveys we conducted, program leaders were asked what makes implementing these key practices for students challenging. Most program leaders discussed funding and costs to be a barrier, particularly as many students face significant instructional, physical, and emotional hurdles as they come into a high school alternative. Program leaders indicated that they need to provide dedicated and personalized supports, which may include individualized instruction, counseling or life coach services, and connection other services to meet additional needs, such as food or childcare. The resources needed to provide these supports was described as an intensified challenge during the pandemic, especially in the switch to virtual engagement. One program leader specifically said that defending their funding to legislators is difficult.

Additionally, a few program said they need experienced staff members with a mindset of high expectations to support the work. Key informants said the presence of supported, appropriately trained, and caring adults was a necessary condition for students to be empowered and feel supported in pursuing their interests.

## Adult-student relationships

Relationships are particularly important for students in high school alternatives. Interviewees said a key program practice was providing students with opportunities to connect to caring adults who can support their goals. These adults could be educators, paraprofessionals, counselors or life coaches, mentors, or others depending on the program structure and composition. Building these relationships requires opportunities for regular positive connection, adults who can connect with students' lived experiences, and trust-filled and trauma-informed/healing-centered restorative engagement (table 2). In the survey, program leaders were asked to identify the most helpful aspect of their programs. They most often cited positive relationships with caring staff members and other students, and a few leaders described the importance of cultural competency in those relationships.

***“When students come to our school, we just really focus on what they are capable of and encouraging them to be their best selves. So, it's a very additive, supportive environment. The competency-based approach really comes in there. There's no failure. We don't give Fs.”***

**– Program leader**

**YouthBuild provides staff members with training in restorative practices that they take into their work with students. They do not stop the relationship building at graduation: Students are provided with opportunities to connect with a mentor for the full year following graduation alongside a suite of extended comprehensive support services that ensure students stay on track beyond their program.**

**Table 2. Effective practices of high school alternatives – adult-student relationships**

<b>Adult-student relationships</b>	<b>Effective</b>	<b>Ineffective</b>
<b>Opportunities for connection</b>	Frequent relationship-building and mentoring opportunities with passionate, caring adults (Jones, 2011)*	<i>Limited opportunities to connect with adults</i>
<b>Adult representativeness</b>	Multiple caring adults available for students, particularly adults who are representative of or deeply value the whole student, including cultures, identities, and experiences (Lind, 2013)*	<i>Lack of access to adults who share students' experiences</i>
<b>Relationship style</b>	Relationships are guided by trauma-informed/healing-centered and restorative practices that lead to trust and reciprocity (Slaten et al., 2016)	<i>Authoritative adult-student relationships</i>

Source: Education Northwest analysis of relevant literature and key informant and program leader interviews, informed advisory group input.

## Staff supports

To implement effective practices for students, interviewees said staff members need access to a range of supports, including a positive, culturally competent work environment and access to professional development and learning (table 3). Interviewees said context was important for understanding how these practices are implemented. For example, educator professional development should be catered to the specific curriculum, program model, and student population the educator serves. This can be done in part by connecting with other educators in the high school alternative field to share lessons learned. These supports can also apply to other staff members (e.g., counselors, paraprofessionals, mentors) depending on the structure and composition of the program.

**Table 3. Needed adult supports for facilitation of effective practices in high school alternatives**

<b>Key supportive practices for adults</b>	
<b>Baseline staff needs</b>	Educators are assured safety, the comfort of a full-time work week, and competitive wages*
<b>School culture</b>	Leaders and educators build culturally competent systems and positive working and learning environments where student culture is represented and valued (Te Riele et al., 2017)*

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## Key supportive practices for adults

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### Educator recruitment and retention

Schools engage in explicit strategies to recruit and retain educators who have the right background and experience to implement effective practices, particularly among educators whose culture and experiences reflect those of the students they serve (Duren, 2020)\*

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### Staff professional development

Staff members are supported in their learning so they can grow as practitioners—whether educators, administrators, or counselors—and better serve the needs of their students (Plows, 2017)\*

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### Community of practice

Program networks offer opportunities for educational leaders to connect with one another, share resources, and offer encouragement (Te Riele et al., 2017)\*

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*Source: Education Northwest analysis of relevant literature and key informant and program leader interviews, informed advisory group input.*

In open-ended survey questions, program leaders were asked to describe what professional development opportunities they currently provide to their staff. Many programs provide instructional coaching to teachers and instructional leaders, mental health and first aid certificates, financial literacy certificates, and curriculum development. Training happens both in person and virtually. Program leaders said their trainings offer technical assistance and are trauma-informed and content specific.

Most program leaders in our survey cited time and resources as the most challenging factors in providing educators with professional development opportunities. Resources were typically financial but also included personnel, like access to substitute teachers. One program leader specifically cited COVID-related challenges, including the inability to visit program sites for coaching.

**The Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs (MAAP) provides opportunities for alternative educators to share information, resources, and innovation. Alternative educator experiences vary so much from the experiences of traditional educators, but experiences also vary within alternative education—for example, in rural or urban settings or among different student populations. MAAP allows alternative educators to tap into a network of practitioners to overcome policy and practice barriers to student success.**

# Recommendations

Based on what we heard from key informants, program leaders, and our advisory group, we offer the following recommendations for funders, policymakers and others looking to positively impact the field of high school alternatives.



## Fund practices that work

As in many fields, success for high school alternatives is often facilitated by access to resources. However, existing state and local funding policies are often at odds with successful program practices. For example, funds often limit access to resources that are needed to meet the unique needs of students in high school alternatives—such as funding to support students past age 20 or to provide comprehensive supports and case management. Funders and policymakers can help by advocating for and investing funding practices that work. This could be done tying funding to the practices described in this report that align with the NAEA standards and/or have a strong evidentiary basis (e.g., work-based learning). Additionally, funders and policymakers can advocate for wider implementation of weighted student funding models and the application of those models to alternative high school settings.



## Remove policy barriers to support effective practices and align policy across contexts

Policy can either help or hinder the ability of high-quality programs to implement key practices for student success (e.g., seat time requirements may conflict with flexible, competency-based approaches to credit accrual). Additionally, conflicting policy requirements across jurisdictions at multiple levels of government can limit the spread of high-quality programs. Those seeking to positively impact the field of high school alternatives can start by advocating for policy changes in their state and local context. Addressing jurisdictional variation in policies will be challenging. One option is to develop model policies that states and localities can adopt to support effective alternative high school pathways and disseminate those widely.



## Spread or pilot successful, evidence-based programs in new spaces

Beyond changes in funding and policy, individuals looking to positively impact the field of high school alternatives can also focus their energies spreading and scaling effective program models and/or programmatic elements that have been found successful in serving students. These include such practices as work-based learning, project-based learning, flexible credit

accrual, supportive adult relationships, and others described in this report. Policymakers can use ESSA evidence standards to tie funding to evidence-based program models and/or require rigorous evaluation for programs with a more limited evidentiary base. Funders can target their financial support to those evidence-based programs and practices and invest in evidence building (Treskon et al., 2022) in key under-researched areas (e.g., postsecondary and career focused programs) and program implementation and outcomes (e.g., implementation fidelity, impacts on specific populations, and mental health and other well-being outcomes). Appendix B provides an overview of the evidence of effectiveness for programs identified in this scan.

Additionally, those seeking to support programmatic improvement should consider:

- **Identifying “tight” program practices, allowing other elements to be contextual.** There is a significant amount of diversity in how programs are implemented and operate. A one-size-fits-all approach with high school alternatives will not work because of varying district, local, and state contexts. Instead, find the essential, or tight, practices that are necessary for success and allow other practices to remain loose and be tailored to the context.
- **Prioritizing educator professional development.** Key supportive practices for educators—including a quality working environment, learning opportunities, and communities of practice—can make all the difference for supporting students. However, these practices are often not adequately supported by traditional funding streams.



## Change mindsets around assets orientation and high expectations for students

Interviewees all described the need for educators to come in with high expectations for student success. While shifting mindsets is a significant undertaking, it can have huge impacts on the opportunities available for students (FrameWorks Institute, 2020). In fact, this may be an opportune time to focus on shifting mindsets, as the COVID-19 pandemic brought the need for flexible approaches to high school completion into the public discourse. Public information campaigns could disseminate new narratives, such as bright spots in alternative education like [this profile of a Big Picture Learning school](#), as well as create and share evidence of the effectiveness of high-quality programs.



## Protect students from low-quality alternatives and promote accountability for meaningful outcomes

While our advisory group members were careful to reiterate that many programs do excellent work, they also identified the need to protect students from low-quality or predatory providers. Youth and young adults participating in high school alternatives deserve high-quality education that recognizes their assets and provides them with avenues for future success. They also deserve to be protected from predatory and harmful programming that does not serve their interests and can often make things worse. A well-funded organization dedicated to supporting accountability and improvement in the high school alternatives space could make important headway in promoting quality experiences for the young people served in these programs. Funders could also work collaboratively with states to redesign state accountability models to better support program quality and improvement.



## Develop statewide and regional networks of schools and programs

Community of practice networks where practitioners share practices and learnings can provide a guide or framework to help alternative schools establish and sustain best practices. These networks use continuous improvement to learn what works for whom and under what conditions, shaping improvements in practice (Bryk et al., 2015). An example of an effective network is the Minnesota Alternative Learning Center Networked Improvement Community (Margolin et al., 2021).



## Support the fiscal mapping of available funding opportunities

Leaders of high school alternatives may not know of or have access to all the funding available to their programs and the students they serve. For example, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government made new public funding available to high school alternatives through Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. However, to access these funds, leaders need help identifying them and understanding the best strategies to secure them. Funding is needed to support development of a fiscal map for the opportunities available to high school alternatives.<sup>3</sup> Once funding opportunities have been identified, leaders need general operating support—funding as well as in-kind technical support—to reach those grant dollars.

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of a fiscal map, see the work of the Children's Funding Project: <https://www.childrensfundingproject.org/state-and-local-fiscal-maps>

## Guidelines from the field

In addition to the recommendations related to mindsets and narratives, policy and budget strategy, and practice improvement listed above, key informants and program leaders suggested a few core themes to guide future efforts to support high school alternatives. Interviewees suggested that funders and others looking to positively impact the field of high school alternatives keep these things in mind as they pursue the recommendations listed above.

- **Focus on assets.** Funders sometimes focus their requests for programming and reporting in ways that focus program leaders' efforts on student deficits. Instead, funders should examine their own strategies to support program leaders in highlighting student assets and growth.
- **Engage students directly.** Key informants and program leaders said youth should always have the opportunity to provide input into program creation, changes, and practices. Through their lived experiences with high school alternatives, youth provide a perspective that program leaders and funders cannot.
- **Engage educators directly.** Program leaders said while researchers, funders, and policymakers often speak directly to technical support providers or school leaders, this approach lacks the benefit of teacher perspectives. Program leaders said teachers provide a critical perspective, as they "are on the ground every day and know what's happening with young people."
- **Support learning between traditional and alternative programs.** Key informants and program leaders said traditional school systems have a lot to learn from successful high school alternatives. Alternative models need opportunities to have their stature elevated and to share their successes with the broader field.
- **Establish consistent and long-term funding.** High school alternatives often face inconsistent funding streams that leave them scrambling to find new funding sources every two or three years. This impacts program implementation, as program leaders must pivot to respond to the requirements of different funders. Multi-year grants that offer conditional renewal opportunities based on meeting key outcome benchmarks can help maintain and grow successful program models. Funders and policymakers can also explore collaborations to help seed innovation, promote program improvement, and scale successful models.

# Conclusion

High school alternatives, when supported by asset-based mindsets and narratives and supportive practices and policies, can provide students who have been underserved by traditional schools an opportunity to engage in relevant learning opportunities, connect with caring adults, and build momentum for their future. Furthermore, the flexibility, adaptability, and innovation that is possible within alternative spaces can fill a gap in student opportunity made apparent by the pandemic. Funders and others looking to positively impact the field can help to shape the diffuse, complex, and often underresourced space of high school alternatives by pushing for supportive mindsets and narratives, policies and budgets, and effective practices that ensure programs are equipped with the tools they need to support student success.



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# Appendix A. Interviewees

**Table A1. List of landscape scan interviewees – key informants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Robert Balfanz	Everyone Graduates Center
Jenny Curtain	Barr Foundation
Sophie Fanelli	Stuart Foundation
Laura Fast Buffalo Horse	Portland Public Schools
Sheryl Hart	Arizona Department of Education
Sherry Holly	Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Alternative Education
Bradley Jensen	Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs/Empower Learning Center
Mark Johnson	Wisconsin Technical College System
Ulcca Joshi Hansen	Grantmakers for Education
Stephanie Krauss	First Quarter Strategies
Saskia Levy Thompson	Carnegie Corporation of New York
Andrew Moore	National League of Cities
José Muñoz	Coalition for Community Schools
Stephen Patrick	Aspen/Opportunity Youth Forum
Antonia Rangel-Caril	National League of Cities
Jorge Ruiz de Velasco	Gardner Center/California Alternative Education Initiative
Joel Vargas	Jobs for the Future
Elliot Washor	Big Picture Learning
Korinna Wolfe	Portland Public Schools

**Table A2. List of interviewees – program leaders**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Betsy Delgado	The Excel Center and Indianapolis Metropolitan High School
Deborah Good	Future Focused Education's X3 Internship Program
Liz Brenner	SIATech
Melissa Rowker	YouthBuild USA
Nick Mathern	Gateway to College
Tara Madden	On Track to Career Success

# Appendix B. Identified Programs and Evidence of Effectiveness

The field of high school alternatives includes many different types of programs, models, and curricula. For this landscape scan, we narrowed our focus to schools, programs, or models that meet the following criteria:

1. Provide a high school diploma.
2. Provide a workforce development component: training, internships, and/or apprenticeships that can lead to a job or career after program completion.
3. Either multi-site or embedded in a multi-site initiative.
4. Serve underresourced students.

**Table B1. List of identified programs and evidence of effectiveness**

Organization	Program description	Evidence of effectiveness
<u><a href="#">Acceleration Academy</a></u>	Research-based community and school district partner that re-engages youth through web-based curriculums, individualized learning plans, future focused supports, flexible instruction, and other wrap-around services.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>
<u><a href="#">Back on Track</a></u> (part of <a href="#">Jobs for the Future</a> )	Technical assistance / research organization that provides support and coaching to organizations to partner with CBOs, high schools, community colleges, employers, and training organizations. Model is 3-phased: enriched preparation, postsecondary bridging, and first-year support.	<u><a href="#">Quasi-experimental evaluation</a></u> ESSA Tier 2
<u><a href="#">Big Picture Learning</a></u>	Charter school network that uses student learning communities, advisors, mentors, and relevant learning to produce student-centered learning design, where students are actively invested in their learning and are challenged to pursue their interests by a supportive community of educators, professionals, and family members.	<u><a href="#">Mixed methods</a></u> ESSA Tier 3

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Program description</b>	<b>Evidence of effectiveness</b>
<b><u>Da Vinci RISE School</u></b>	Part of the Da Vinci charter school network, RISE High builds off Da Vinci's innovative approach to project-based, real-world learning, connecting to industry, and bridging the gap between K-12, college and career.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>
<b><u>Diploma Plus</u></b>	Nonprofit organization that seeks to develop, implement, and sustain, in partnership with school districts and communities, innovative educational approaches and small secondary schools that provide rigorous and student-centered alternatives for youth. The core of the Diploma Plus model centers on the establishment of a competency-, performance-based systems in public high schools.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>
<b><u>Ednovate</u></b>	Network of charter schools serving first-generation college-bound students from traditionally underserved communities.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>
<b><u>Excel Center</u></b>	Designed to meet the needs of adults who have not completed their high school diploma, The Excel Center educates 10,000 people across the country, who graduate from our adult high school with a state-certified high school diploma, college credits and industry-recognized certifications. This is an in person education model designed to disrupt generational poverty by providing free childcare and transportation, life coaching/wrap around supports, classroom instruction and college and career readiness coaching.	<b><u>Quasi-experimental study</u></b> <i>(Randomized control trial is in progress at the time of this report)</i> ESSA Tier 2
<b><u>Future Focused Education</u></b>	Nonprofit that partners with a network of industry-focused schools; student centered; community based curriculum.	Mixed Methods ESSA Tier 4
<b><u>Gateway to College</u></b>	Connects K-12 school districts with colleges and leverages a national network of peers and expertise. The key to success is the holistic student support.	<b><u>Mixed Methods</u></b> ESSA Tier 4
<b><u>Mountain Education Charter High School</u></b>	Mountain Education Charter High School is an evening, self-paced, public high school that grants diplomas and is associated with eighteen high districts across North Georgia. Curriculum is self-paced and mastery based.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>
<b><u>New Visions for Public Schools</u></b>	A technical assistance and service provider that provides supports a network of schools. Shares best practices and lessons learned, to enable others in New York City and across the nation to raise student achievement in schools at scale	<i>None identified at this time.</i>

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Program description</b>	<b>Evidence of effectiveness</b>
<b><u>Phase 4 Learning Center</u></b>	Community based non-profit organization that establishes partnerships with employers, higher education programs, the U.S. Military and community organizations to meet the needs of the region's employment sectors by preparing and connecting participants to the appropriate career path.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>
<b><u>SIA Tech</u></b>	SIATech's network of free public charter high schools is the foundation of our educational ecosystem. Schools re-enroll students highly at-risk of dropping out and those who have already given up and guide them to graduation. Schools are small, individualized, and relevant to today's workforce needs.	<b><u>Three-year study using the ARTIC Scale</u></b> ESSA Tier 4
<b><u>Success Centers</u></b>	Nonprofit organization with a focus on career pathways to lucrative job opportunities in high-demand industries.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>
<b><u>Talent Development Schools</u></b>	Technical assistance and service provider that partners with high schools and middle schools to provide professional learning and guidance. works with schools to build a partnership that establishes organizational, curricular, and instructional strategies, plus multiple levels of systematic professional development for faculty and staff.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>
<b><u>Texas Can Academies</u></b>	Texas Can Academies provide personalized graduation and life plans, small class sizes, flexible schedules, and support services for students. Their mission is to provide the highest quality education for all students, especially those who have struggled in a traditional high school setting, in order to ensure their economic independence.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>
<b><u>YouthBuild</u></b>	YouthBuild is a federally and privately funded program operated at over 250 organizations nationwide, serving over 10,000 young people each year. Each organization provides construction-related training and may also provide training in other in-demand industries, along with educational services, counseling, and leadership-development opportunities.	<b><u>RCT</u></b> ESSA Tier 1
<b><u>Youth Connection Charter School</u></b>	Youth Connection Charter School is a not-for-profit educational organization, partnering with community-based organizations who serve Chicago neighborhoods. They provide personalized, competency-based academics alongside post-secondary engagement and extracurricular activities.	<i>None identified at this time.</i>

Source: Education Northwest web and document analysis.



# Appendix C. Characteristics of Featured High School Alternatives

This appendix provides more information on the high school alternatives featured in this landscape scan.

## Student demographics served

All the programs we surveyed focus their services on overage students from low-income communities (table C1). Most programs also serve students who have dropped out of high school as well as students who are credit deficient or off-track for graduation. Program leaders were asked to describe any eligibility requirements of their programs. While most program leaders mentioned age and locale restrictions, other requirements varied significantly by program type and even by site. For example, while some schools require students to have dropped out of high school, others are open to students with a high school credential or certain grade point average.

**Table C1. All programs serve students who are overage and living in low-income communities**

Student demographics	Programs
Youth who are overage	10
Youth living in low-income communities	
Youth who have dropped out of high school	9
Youth who are credit deficient or off-track for graduation with their cohort	
Youth of color	8
Youth who are immigrants or refugees	
Youth who were formerly incarcerated	
Youth who were formerly or are currently involved in foster care	
Youth who are experiencing housing insecurity	
Youth who have been expelled or suspended from their previous high school	7
LGBTQ youth	
English language learners	
Youth in rural environments	6
Youth with disabilities	

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one option.

Source: Education Northwest analysis of 2022 program leader survey (n = 10).

## Outreach

Most programs recruit students through word-of-mouth (table C2). Many students also get referrals from high schools and community-based organizations or are recruited through social media and events (e.g., family nights). When asked what brings students to their program, one program leader described systemic barriers including poverty and racism. Other program leaders said students wanted a better future for themselves including a diploma, college certification, personalized and flexible workload, job skills, and support.

**Table C2. Most programs recruit students through word-of-mouth, as well as referrals from high schools and community-based organizations**

Recruitment strategies	Programs
Word-of-mouth	9
Referrals from an existing high school program	8
Referrals from a nonprofit or community-based organization	
Use events for recruitment (e.g., family nights at school)	7
Use social media for recruitment	
On-site staff members are fully responsible for youth enrollment	5
Other	3

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one option.

Source: Education Northwest analysis of 2022 program leader survey (n = 10).

Other recruitment strategies described by program leaders included advertising at the Department of Motor Vehicles and presenting workshops at partner schools.

## Services offered

Program leaders were asked to describe the services their program offers students. Most programs provide contextual or project-based learning opportunities, support for postsecondary pathways, and mental and physical health supports (table C3). Additionally, many programs offer career and technical education pathways, employment support, flexible schedules, and dual enrollment in high school and college.

**Table C3. Most programs provide contextual or project-based learning opportunities, support for postsecondary pathways, and mental and physical health supports**

Services offered	Programs
Contextual or project-based learning	9
Support for postsecondary pathways	
Mental and physical health supports	
Career and technical education pathways	8
Employment support/career navigation	
Flexible schedules	
Dual enrollment in high school and college	
Youth leadership or decision-making opportunities	7
Job-specific training	6
Accelerated credit accrual	
Competency-based diploma	
Online learning	
Individualized coursework	
Transportation	
Caregiver and/or family involvement	5
Childcare	3

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one option.

Source: Education Northwest analysis of 2022 program leader survey (n = 10).

Program leaders described other strategies they use with students. Some programs offer college coursework and occupational training, while others offer career exploration courses. A few programs offer support with college admissions processes and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). One program supports schools in implementing an early warning system that monitors whether students are off track for on-time graduation. One program discussed more hands-on 1:1 coaching, partnerships with community colleges, and internships.

## Program partnerships

All program leaders said they partner with community college and other service providers in their work (table C4). Most also partner with local employers, youth development organizations, and school districts. When asked what was needed for these partnerships to be successful, program leaders cited relationships, partnerships, dedicated staff members, consistent communication, and an asset-based view of young people and strong understanding of their needs and goals.

**Table C4. All program leaders said they partner with community colleges and other service providers in their work**

Partners	Programs
Community colleges	10
Service providers	
Local employers	8
Youth development organizations	
School districts	
Other	3

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one option.

Source: Education Northwest analysis of 2022 program leader survey (n = 10).

Other partners described by program leaders include the military, foster care, the criminal justice system, food insecurity providers, and homeless shelters.

## Program outcomes

Program leaders identified the outcomes their program aims to achieve and shared any evidence they had on the effectiveness of their program. We also searched the web to find any evidence for programs that did not respond to our survey. We found most programs do track some outcomes, while others leave tracking responsibilities to their partner schools. Additionally, we found most programs use limited evidence to support their program. Only one program we identified used the most rigorous form of study: a randomized control trial (see table B1 in appendix B for information about programs’ evidence of effectiveness).

All program leaders said they track high school diploma completion, while only one program tracked GED completion (table C5). Some programs track postsecondary enrollment, college and career readiness, and job training and/or certification. Only about half of program leaders said they track longer-term outcomes such as postsecondary completion or job placement.

**Table C5. All program leaders said they track high school diploma completion, while only one program tracked GED completion**

<b>Student outcomes</b>	<b>Programs</b>
High school diploma completion	9
Postsecondary enrollment	7
College or career readiness	6
Job training and/or certification	
Postsecondary completion	4
Job placement	3
Other	
One-year graduation rate	2
GED completion	1
Transition to adult education program	

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one option. One respondent stated programs track data for themselves, so their responses were not included in this table.

Source: Education Northwest analysis of 2022 program leader survey (n = 9).

Other outcomes described by program leaders include fall-to-fall persistence rate, reading and math gains, social capital, job skills, confidence in future and career plans, and military enrollment.

Program leaders were asked in the survey to describe how their program uses data for continuous improvement. We found significant variance based on program structure and goals. Some programs have established program benchmarks and use internal or external teams to analyze various performance measures. Other programs provide support to teachers and school teams to analyze student outcome data (e.g., plan-do-study-act cycles). A few programs are in the process of developing metrics and structures for continuous improvement.